

Committee on Resources

Witness Testimony

Statement for the Record of
Peter Samuel, Executive Director
Schuylkill River Greenway and Heritage Corridor
Hearing on H.R. 1842
to terminate further development and implementation
of the American Heritage Rivers Initiative

Committee on Resources
U.S. House of Representatives
September 24, 1997

On behalf of the Schuylkill River Greenway and Heritage Corridor, its partners and community organizations, I want to thank you and the members of this committee for the opportunity to provide testimony in opposition to H.R. 1842. We are opposed to H.R. 1842 because we believe the American Heritage River Initiative will provide opportunities and benefits to our region in Southeastern Pennsylvania and others like ours around the country.

The Schuylkill River Greenway Association is a membership organization which has been working with citizens and community groups and a host of other partners up and down the river for almost 25 years to promote the river resources and advocate the protection of open space. In the 1990's we went through a process to develop a plan for the Schuylkill as a Heritage Corridor. In 1995 the river corridor was designated by Governor Ridge as Pennsylvania's seventh Heritage Park. Thus the Association expanded its mission to include conservation of the historic and cultural resources within the watershed and a focus on economic development.

We in the Schuylkill Watershed - including conservationists, elected officials, municipal governments, landowners, recreationalists, industry owners and more - are very much interested in the American Heritage River Initiative because it will provide an excellent chance for the widest range of people to take new pride in their river. It will enable us to work with the federal government as a partner in efforts to improve and restore the resources associated with the Schuylkill.

The goal of the American Heritage Rivers initiative is to support communities within existing laws and regulations, by providing them with better information, tools and resources and by encouraging local efforts deserving of special recognition. This is precisely the kind of assistance the Schuylkill River Corridor needs.

We believe that our community knows best what resources will benefit us the most and would like to see the government prioritize federal spending based on that community led process, and to help people better understand how to access existing federal resources.

Before I explain further why and how this proposed new initiative will help the people and resources directly in the Schuylkill River Valley I would like to describe my area of the country. I will discuss our efforts to create a heritage corridor based on wide ranging partnerships, what work has already been

accomplished, what the larger shared vision is for the region and then, how we see this new government initiative fitting into the entire picture.

BACKGROUND ON THE SCHUYLKILL

The Schuylkill River flows through some of the most historically significant land in the United States. The natural resources of the region and the people who live and work there have helped weave the social, political, economic and industrial fabric of Pennsylvania and the nation.

The river itself extends 128 miles from the mining region of Schuylkill County through four other counties and into the city of Philadelphia where it links up with the Delaware River. It comprises three national parks, many acres of state park and game lands, numerous county parks, arboretums, wildlife preserves as well as widespread residential development, agriculture, industrial towns and private lands.

William Penn established his colony relatively late in the history of European colonization of North America's seaboard, but the rapid growth of the colony soon made Pennsylvania a region of major substance and significance within the world.

By the 1770's Philadelphia stood as the political, economic and cultural center of colonial America. The city's strategic location, wealth, industrial and commercial importance, large and cosmopolitan population combined to make it the hub of America's revolutionary activity. It was the site of the First and Second Continental Congresses and the birthplace of the Declaration of Independence. It was along the Schuylkill, in the winter of 1778, that General Washington and his troops camped in Valley Forge before the turning point in the Revolutionary War.

By 1900, the use of anthracite coal to power industry caused a total transformation in the valley. The region was still dominated by Philadelphia, but with many urban and industrial centers, both large and small, thriving and interconnected by railroads. During this period, the entire river valley functioned as an interlocking series of industrial engines, and Philadelphia became a national leader in industry.

The vast growth and development of communities and industries along the river was not without consequence. By 1927 it was estimated that there was 38 million tons of coal silt in the river. The Schuylkill was so polluted that it had essentially lost its value as a river - the canal system was no longer navigable, the river was spurned as a recreational resource and as a supply of drinking water it had become seriously degraded.

The river has been making a slow come back. In the 1970's the Schuylkill River Greenway Association was formed to begin advocating the protection and health of the river and its tributaries. The Schuylkill was designated by the state legislature as Pennsylvania's first scenic river in 1978.

In the spring of 1995, after an extensive three year planning process involving representatives from each of the five counties and the public and private sectors, a Management Action Plan for the Schuylkill Heritage Corridor was completed. Later that year the Schuylkill was designated by Governor Tom Ridge as Pennsylvania's seventh State Heritage Park.

The Schuylkill River Greenway Association which had many years of experience working with partners throughout the corridor, became the organization to implement the Heritage Corridor Plan. The SRGA adopted a revised and expanded mission for improving the river, increasing recreational opportunities,

saving historic structures, encouraging regional cooperation, attracting tourism and generating jobs and permanent economic benefits.

These actions mirror steps that have been taken in hundreds of communities. People across the nation have begun to realize the promise of heritage tourism. They are discovering how well the preservation of historic, cultural and natural resources combines with the development and marketing of tourism to sustain local economies and ways of life. Resource preservation and economic viability are not mutually exclusive but compatible and mutually enhancing. It has been recognized that multiple management and funding sources are the most appropriate method of preserving and interpreting the nationally important resources and themes.

The Greenway and Heritage Corridor has committed to work towards the following goals:

- Be the keeper of the vision - coordinating, managing and implementing programs projects and activities within the corridor that serve to celebrate the heritage and preserve and enhance quality of life
- Linking and Leveraging - working between and among agencies, attractions and organizations in support of the vision, mission and goals of the Schuylkill Heritage Corridor
- Serve as a resource - providing leadership and guidance in educational, historical, financial and marketing efforts and technical assistance in training, interpretation, and community involvement

PROJECTS OF THE GREENWAY AND HERITAGE CORRIDOR

Projects range from the creation of trails built on abandoned rail corridors, the construction or improvement of trail bridges that cross streams and roads, development of riverside parks and open space, creation of canoe launches, historic conservation and interpretation projects, development of visitor information and a wayfinding system, and the implementation of an educational curriculum plan.

Projects throughout the five county area in Historic Conservation and Interpretation include:

- *Planning for the renovation of the historic Phoenixville Foundry building in Phoenixville to become a visitor center which focuses on the steel and iron making heritage - in association with Phoenixville Area Development Corporation
- *The Reconstruction of the Schuylkill Navigation Canal Lock 60 in Port Providence - in association with the Schuylkill Canal Association
- *Interpretive Planning and Exhibit Design to develop visitor center exhibits to describe the agricultural history in the Schuylkill Valley - in association with the Peter Wentz Farmstead
- *Development of a plan for reuse of the historic Tamaqua Train Station in downtown Tamaqua for use as a visitor reception point - in association with the Save Our Station group
- *Renovation of an historic building in downtown Reading to be used as a heritage corridor visitor center - in association with the Berks County Conservancy
- *Development of Engineering Plans for the restoration of the historic waterwheel at the Fairmount Waterworks in Philadelphia - in association with the Philadelphia Water Department and Fairmount Park

*Assistance in the stabilization of the historic Continental Powder Works - in association with East Pikeland Township

It was recognized early on that there would need to be a broad range of support among financial, community, educational, business, and government leaders and foundations and existing partners in order to balance programmatic goals and objectives and achieve financial stability within the organization. This diversification of support allows the organization to develop flexible funding programs that strengthens the corridor and ensures its long-term success.

HOW THE AMERICAN HERITAGE RIVER INITIATIVE CAN HELP OUR WORK

Since I became the Director of the Schuylkill Corridor I have realized that there are federal agencies in our region which have programs that could provide assistance to our various communities. The Army Corps of Engineers has indicated an interest in rehabilitation of desilting basins into wetlands, the Environmental Protection Agency may have funds for restoration projects on the tributaries, the National Park Service could provide greenway and trail planning, Fish and Wildlife may be involved in the development of fish ladders along the many dams. And there are probably many others. How would I know?

My information about these potential programs has been haphazard, helter skelter. If the Schuylkill River is designated as an American Heritage River, information about all of these programs would be made available as a coordinated package of services. The federal government would begin to work for us.

People have called for a better, smarter and more coordinated way to work with the federal government. The American Heritage River Initiative seeks to coordinate these existing authorities in a more efficient and complementary way and proposes that assistance from the federal government will come **at the request of the community**. Once a river is designated, a team of federal agency representatives will be available to help the community determine the role for federal assistance. The committee will look for opportunities to reduce bureaucracy, streamline services and remove policy obstacles.

There is no existing system to provide communities with a coordinated system of federal services. In fact there is so much lack of coordination that it is very possible that within one very small agency such as the National Park Service that more than one department or division could be involved with the same project and never know what the other is doing.

If what is being proposed by the American Heritage Rivers Initiative comes to fruition, it will be a major advance for government. I am not talking about more government, more regulations, more interference, I am talking about coordination, organization and responsiveness. I am talking about better government, ideal government. One that is there when you want it to be and one that provides a coordinated strategy of services that will be truly helpful.

The American Heritage River Initiative will allow for the proper recognition of the collective contributions of ordinary people in significant regions of our nation. The Schuylkill Heritage Corridor provides a framework for people to take pride in their communities, understand their history and work together to enhance the quality of life for their children. We are treating our history and heritage as one of our greatest resources. The American Heritage River Initiative will allow us to build on that and ensure that the present

and future is successfully linked to our past.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today.

###